

Dek Unu Magazine

Solo Exhibitions of Fine
Photoart Portfolios

July, 2018

Featured Artist

Tara Ott

"Individualized
Personality Series"

Cover Image: Individualized
Personality Series #6
© Tara Ott



Artist Interview - Tara Ott

Hi, Tara, This is a stunning portfolio...What a creative idea!

I invited women of all ages and races to be a part of the project on a voluntary basis. The volunteer, whom I had not previously met, and I met for coffee so I could conduct an informal interview to understand who they were as an individual. I would read their body language and listen to what they were saying in order to gauge who I perceived them to be, based solely on this informal interview. From there, I would go to my studio and enter a large diorama I built out of plywood, two by fours, and drywall. The structure was eight feet long and six feet tall and consisted of three walls, a floor, and a roof. Through an abstract translation of each person's personality, I covered the entire interior with paint. Afterwards, I would invite the model back and paint the front of her body from head to toe with acrylic paint that matched painted space. The final stage was to photograph her painted form in the painted structure. The final pose, which became a visual illustration of the entire process, was also based on the interview.

The idea behind this project was to create unique identities for each of the women past the initial look or the sexualization of their nudity. Instead, I focused on them as empowered people and how they presented themselves rather than simply what they looked like. I found that the paint and textures frequently took away details like their race and age while highlighting their individual personality traits.

A project this complex must have required lots of planning.

I consider myself an accidental artist; projects sort of just happen. I have never been one to get an idea, execute it perfectly, and then be able to talk about it effectively. My process is very piecemeal. With this particular series, I started having dreams about this giant room/diorama. I dreamed about it every night. When I decided that these dreams were not going to stop, I decided to build it. After I built the room, I sat with it in my studio for days (maybe weeks?) until I started getting the feeling I had to order paint.

When the paint arrived, I decided to just go ahead and paint my giant diorama white. (You see where this is going?) The next push I felt was to ask someone to come in to be painted; but first I sat down to have coffee and talk about what I was thinking. (I honestly did not quite know what I was thinking). The coffee became a casual conversation where I let the subject talk about herself. This sparked the entire project.

I did not know for a long time, maybe not even until this project came to pass, that I could read people's auras. I just knew after talking to this woman that a certain color and pattern popped in my head that I needed to translate in my room. Ultimately, the model ended up a part of it as well after I painted the room.

This attracted a spiral of volunteers. Once I had one done, the model would share with their friends and the friends (whom I never met) would call me to ask if they could model. I, of course, said yes and started the entire process again. Coffee, paint, body paint, photo, and goodbye.

Some of the people that volunteered were my friends or colleagues, but mostly it was strangers that heard about me from word of mouth. I had no guidelines about the volunteers except that they had to be women. I do a lot of female/feminist art and felt it was important to do portraits of strong women, how I depict them, and how they depict themselves.





Individualized Personality Series 1



Individualized Personality Series 2



Individualized Personality Series 3



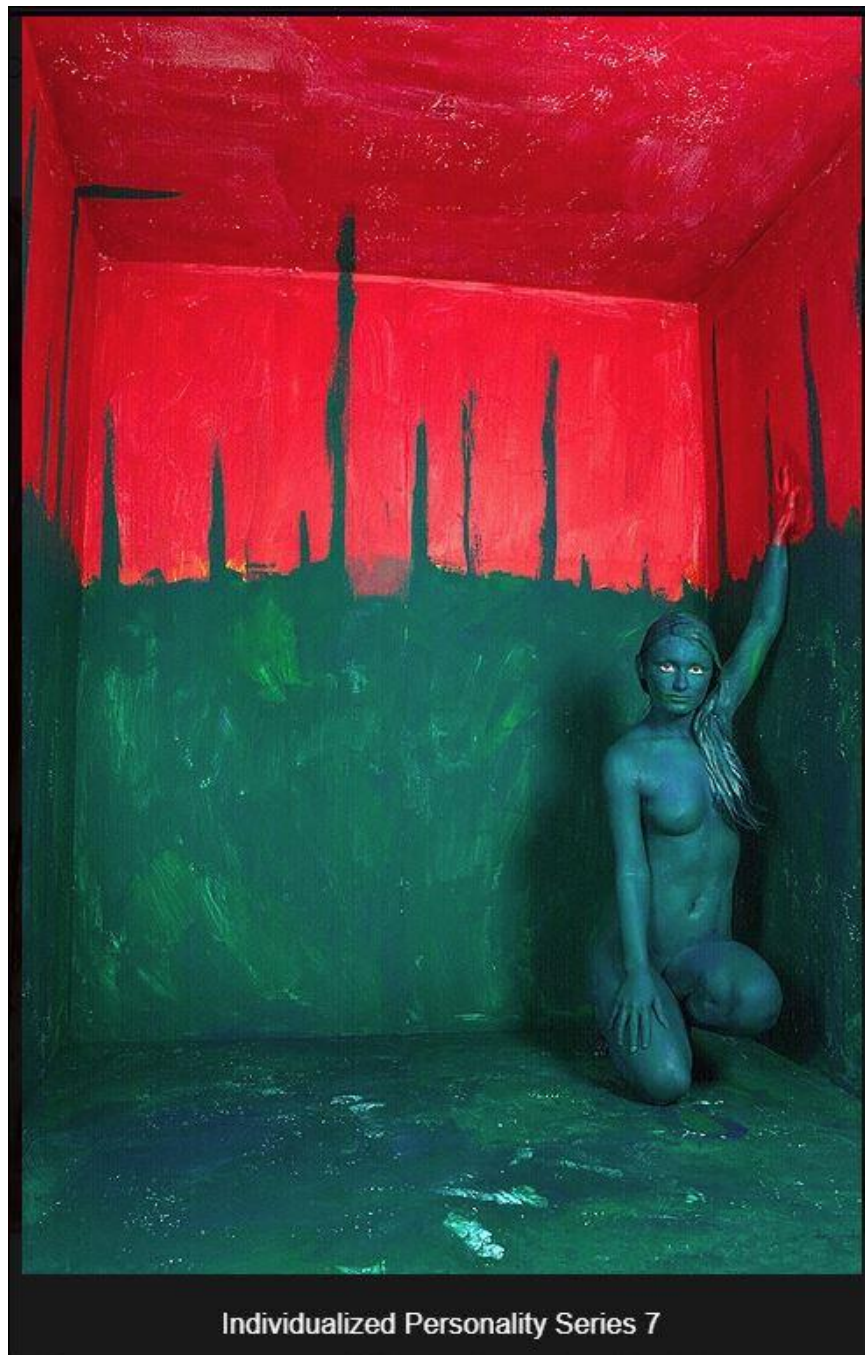
Individualized Personality Series 4



Individualized Personality Series 5



Individualized Personality Series 6



Individualized Personality Series 7



Individualized Personality Series 8



Individualized Personality Series 9



Individualized Personality Series 10



Individualized Personality Series 11

These images seem deeply personal. What kinds of questions did you ask?

I love this question. This is what I'll say about it - I have never shared what I asked them nor what the subject said. I wanted that performance aspect of the piece to be personal. I would like the images to speak for themselves instead of needing to share what was spoken about. I will say it was a very informal interview. I let them steer the conversation but might direct if I felt they needed a little prompting.

How did your models react to the finished product?

Overwhelmingly so, the models were all happy with their painting and final photograph. I had some who were shocked that I depicted them so accurately while others just talked about how they enjoyed their image and thought their own picture was the best.

Talk about your feminism and its connection to your work.

Oh, I am most definitely a feminist artist. I really love to explore the female interpretation and how it is construed by the viewer. I don't believe that only women can be feminist; my husband is one too. I am part of the fourth wave feminism movement where I want to see all people in all acts of life to be seen as equal. I have found, through my studies and artistic career, that I have the most powerful message if I deliver my personal experience instead of trying to talk about issues as a whole. In that way, I relate to feminism and the voice of one of the many minorities.



You have BFA and MFA degrees, earned with honors. Any words for someone taking an academic path in the arts?

I'd say do your research. For grad school, if you want to study art, figure out what school best compliments your art style. I wanted to be sure to work in whatever media I wanted at any given time, so I looked for schools that were interdisciplinary. If you want to teach, make sure you find a school that has the option to let its grads become TAs. Most undergrad art schools require you to take studio classes in multiple media. Really utilize that to see what other formats you can express yourself in. This is the time to be messy and make bad work that leads to better work. Lastly, if you want to pursue the arts - do it. Don't let anyone tell you it's a pointless degree. If it makes you happy then just follow your gut.

Influences? Mentor(s)? Or, maybe, someone from your past who deserves an "I told you so?"

I have been studying and looking at tableau photography for as long as I can remember. Gregory Crewdson, Cindy Sherman, Sandy Skoglund, and Catherine Opie are some of my favorite artists. I find myself looking at their work often.

One of the best mentors I have ever had was my graduate advisor- Corinne Diop. She is a fantastic artist that has such a zest for life. Something about our art styles just clicked. I remember one summer hanging out with her in the digital photography lab and just scanning body parts on the flat bed scanner and not really knowing why. I found our art styles are very similar in that we act first and figure out why later. She was someone I could walk into her office and tell her "I have no idea what I'm doing or what art I'm going to make." She would just reply "Don't worry. It'll come to you, just keep on going and don't stress in the meantime." Ultimately, I'd just talk to her about life in her office or in my studio. Obviously, I'd find inspiration later on. She was always right. It was never going to be the last idea I ever had. I just had to let it come naturally. Anyway, phenomenal teacher and friend.

Do you teach? Is there a message for them embedded in your work with students?

I'm not currently teaching but, over the years, I have worked as a gallerist, studio assistant, critic, and graduate advisor. I also taught drawing, darkroom photography, digital photography, and visual technology.

When I teach, I push my students to find a concept that really speaks to them and to develop their own style. I had professors in undergrad that really wanted me to make art like they envisioned. I found this to be really harmful as a student and, more importantly, as a developing artist. I wanted the "A" so I changed my style instead of developing what was true to me. As a professor, I try really hard to let the students take their own path. My job is to give them a loose prompt and help them craft wise and to critique how successfully their concept is conveyed. I want to help shape artists... not to make clones of myself.



You have compiled an extensive exhibit and publication history including several recent international shows. How do you prospect for opportunities?

I constantly look up show opportunities on varying art opportunity websites. I tend to look for free shows because, let's face it, it's expensive enough being an artist and shipping work. The best site I have found for listings of international show opportunities outside of the United States, and the original source for my recent shows in Stockholm, Rome, and Frankfurt, Germany, is www.theartguide.com. For opportunities in the United States, I have had good luck with listings at www.zapplication.com and "cafe" or www.callforentry.com.

What's next? A new project? Travel? Show(s)? A book?

I want to continue to build up my show record and hopefully start adding in a lot more solo shows to it.

As far as my art practice goes, I am always working on something new. As I learned when I was in school, I'm letting the work be successful or not and giving myself the grace to let my work guide me. Not all my projects need to be on my website. Haha!

Hopefully, next time we talk, I will have a job at a university and will be making work that will end up in a show or book. For now, I'll keep creating and allow my future to remain open.

Where can we see more of your work?

You can find more of my work on www.TaraOtt.com. Feel free to send me a message there too. I love talking to other artists.



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